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Dryad Fancies and Fairy Imaginations in *Phantastes*

John Docherty

Phantastes, in Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*, possesses "sharp foresight," but is constantly troubled by "idle thoughts and fantasies." This is similar to the situation of Anodos in MacDonald's *Phantastes*. An attempt is made to distinguish between Anodos' fantasies and his imaginations in the early chapters of the book. The imaginations are shown to be of an esoteric nature. In this they are comparable with other imagery in the book.

1. Outline of the Plot of *Phantastes* and its Relationship to the figure Phantastes in Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*

George MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1858) is an exceptionally complex work. The protagonist-narrator Anodos describes adventures that happened to him when he was apparently wandering around the countryside¹ and perceived everything through intense imaginative perception, the Phantastes of the title. MacDonald bases (his upon the figure Phantastes living the forebrain of the "House of Alma" (the human body) in book 2 of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*.²

MacDonald, writing in the second half of the nineteenth century, possessed an advantage over Spenser through his access to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's philosophical works—most importantly to the *Biographia Literaria* (1817) with its famous passage in chapter 13 distinguishing the Fancy and the Imagination, the latter "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I Am" (167). This distinction is the central theme of MacDonald's crucially important 1867 essay "The Imagination: Its Functions and it's Culture."³

In the first chapter, Anodos, at a crucial turning point in his life—his twenty-first birthday—, is asked by his younger sister: "Is there a fairy country, brother?" (7). This seems to awaken him to the side of his nature MacDonald depicted as the great, grand mother, running "grand" and "mother" together. In later stories he combined her with the wise-woman figure of chapter 19 of *Phantastes*.

In chapters 3 to 9 of *Phantastes*, Anodos, living primarily in his

thinking, visits three buildings with their inhabitants. These are lightly disguised caricatures of three contrasting religious outlooks. The occupants of the first dwelling have reverted to a form of nature-worship and an exploration of their outlook is the primary subject of the present paper. The second dwelling exhibits a wide range of outlooks within the Church of England. The parson is caricatured as a farmer without imagination or fancy who sees his job as feeding swill to pigs. Here Anodos' powers of imagination are seriously weakened: "I could hardly believe that there was a Fairy Land" (83). Then, when the "farmer's" son maliciously misdirects him to the third dwelling, which superficially resembles a church, he **[end of page 16]** encounters a doctrine that is the inverse of John 1.1-5. It seems to represent MacDonald's view of the obsession of the more extreme Non-Conformist churches for reducing every biblical image to a materialistic piece of doctrine—a tendency that he campaigned against in his books and sermons throughout his life. Here there is a door which, if anyone opens it, almost inevitable leads them to acquire a "shadow" of materialistic thinking. This works against Anodos' Phantastes, almost destroying this faculty in chapter 9, although it promptly re-emerges in the second part of the book.

While in this materialistic state Anodos encounters a girl in whom the child's imaginative delight in the world is marvellously developed. Fearful of its loss at puberty, however she has made it as 'a trinket at her wrist' Anodos' unfeeling materialism destroys this, and she feels she has lost everything. Yet, when Anodos in the third part of the book himself wishes to attain to this state of possessive imagination, it is she who saves him. The Fairy Queen (Spenser's inspirer of the Imagination) has helped her grow into an adult who can "sing for joy [...] and deliver people" who are trapped in pride, as is Anodos at this point (287).

In the second part of *Phantastes*, (chapters 10-17), Anodos narrates his exploration of the Fairy Palace of his feelings. MacDonald particularly stresses here how Anodos (unconsciously) works to develop Love in his heart. MacDonald's conception of Love at the centre of the human being contrasts with Spenser's far more circumscribed description of the association of the heart with the feelings (2,11, 34-43). The Fairy Palace is essentially threefold. Above the central complex of galleries and great chambers is the grand domed library. Here, fancy and imagination are represented in the contrast between fixing ideals in concrete images and questing for them. Below the Palace are underground passages and caverns that are essentially a crude negative inversion of the galleries and chambers

above. By the time Anodos visits this subterranean region he has learned enough to stand up to goblins who mock his imaginative ideals and to a Lilith figure who attempts to seduce him back into self-love.⁴

This gives Anodos the strength to struggle out of the caverns (chapter 18) and kill his lower self. He first assumes he has killed his whole self, but instead the consequence is that he is swiftly transported (chapter 19) to a Wise Woman's cottage where she helps him consolidate his ideals by understanding and integrating his past and present with the future and (unconsciously) with "the timeless." Then she sends him forth into the world with the injunction "Go, my son, and do something worth doing" (251).

Throughout chapters 20 to the middle of 23, Anodos remains in the realm of his will. Some of his adventures here are MacDonald's imaginative re-workings of his own crucial experiences. Anodos here has two principal tasks. The first is the overcoming of Pride—the most dangerous of all his forms of fancy, particularly when, as here, it had largely arisen from the overcoming of past failings. His second task is the freeing of himself from reliance upon the moral/religious codes [17] of others, depicted as suits of armour that inevitably imprison all higher imagination.

By the second part of chapter 23, Anodos has developed his imagination/insight, feelings, humility and will to the extent that he becomes able to destroy an evil, church-dominated Garden of Love which has affinities to Blake's poem of that title (pl. 44). In so doing he eliminates mutually destructive elements in his own soul⁵—an idol and a werewolf—and in chapters 24 and 25 he is able to analyse his experiences and make resolutions for the future.⁶

2. *Phantastes* and the Imagery of the First Part of *Phantastes*

Spenser's *Phantastes* possesses "sharpe foresight, and working wit, / That neuer idle was" (2.9.50). But his work is hampered by flies:

Which buzzed all about, and made such sound,
That they encombred all mens eares and eyes,
All these were idle thoughts and fantasies,
Deuices, dreames, opinions vnsound,
Shewes, visions, sooth-sayes, and prophesies;
And all that fained is, as leasings, tales and lies. (2.9.50-51).

We can thus anticipate that the first chapters of *Phantastes* are likely to contain as much of "[d]euices, dreames, opinions vnsound" as of "sharpe foresight and working wit."

As the basis for the “sharpe foresight, and working wit” of his *Phantastes*, Spenser apparently has in mind something closely akin to what Coleridge in the nineteenth century termed the working of the Primary Imagination. But this foresight and wit manifests properly only when all three occupants of the brain are functioning well, and that, as noted above, happens with Anodos only in the last three chapters of *Phantastes*. In chapters 3 and 4, MacDonald separates “[d]euiques, dreames, opinions vnsound” from what some readers may wish to call fantasies but which are Coleridgian Primary Imaginations. At this early stage, however, his protagonist Anodos is quite unable to make such a distinction, so readers have to work it out for themselves.⁷

MacDonald, of course, also had access to the explorations of the Primary Imagination by the German Romantics, most importantly those of Novalis. The Novalis epigraph to the book is particularly important for understanding the moods and the harmonies MacDonald creates in *Phantastes* as the medium in which Anodos’ fancies and imaginations can flourish. The present study, however, focuses upon the fancies and imaginations themselves.⁸

3. The Mother and Daughter in the Forest Cottage and their—and Anodos’— Fancies about Trees

Like Spenser’s Red Cross Knight at the beginning of *The Faerie Queen*, Anodos, upon entering Fairy Land, almost immediately finds himself wandering in the [18] wood of Error. “[W]ithout any good reason” he leaves the path and the stream beside it that was his initial guide into Fairy Land and turns in “a more southerly direction” (12).⁹

Spenser’s knight takes shelter from “an hideous storme of raine” in a grove

That promised ayde the tempest to withstand:
Whose loftie trees yclade with sommers pride,
Did spred so broad, that heauens light did hide, (1.1.7)

There, he and his lady, Una:

Much can they prayse the trees so straight and hy,
The sayling Pine, the Cedar proud and tall,
The vine-prop Elme, the Poplar neuer dry,
The builder Oake, sole king of forests all,
The Aspine good for staues, the Cypresse funeral.... (1.1.8)

and so on, listing the economic or ornamental virtues of twenty different trees.

Just before Anodos enters “the darkest part of the forest” he sees “a country maiden coming towards [him] from its very depths” (13). As unobtrusively as possible, as if “afraid of being observed by some lurking foe” (1.4), she lists the personalities of six trees. Three—Oak, Elm and Beech—she believes to be trustworthy; the Birch is “too young not to be changeable”; but the Ash and the Alder are to be shunned: “the Ash is an ogre—you will know him by his thick fingers; and the Alder will smother you with her web of hair, if you let her near you at night”(15).¹⁰

Spenser’s knight, lost in the thickest part of the forest, but reassured by “the birdes sweete harmony,” comes to the den of Errour, the vilest of all the monsters in *The Faerie Queen*. Yet she is a literate monster, her loathsome vomit “full of bookes and papers” (1.1.20). Anodos, comes “to a more open part” of the forest. “But even here,” as in the darkest parts, he is astonished, as he says, that: “No bird sang, no insect hummed. Not a living creature crossed my way” (15). Except for a few domestic pets, all animal life—all animality—has been banished from this forest, only to manifest, as Anodos is soon to discover, in the very trees.

The first trees Anodos specifically notices are “four great trees” forming the “corners” of a little wooden cottage, with their branches meeting and intertwining over it, “heaping a great cloud of leaves over it” (16). This recalls Spenser’s grove described above where Errour dwelt and where the trees. “[d]id spred so broad, that heauens light did hide.” Only later is Anodos told that these four trees are Oaks, trees that in Blake’s symbolism usually represent the overshadowing negative aspects of Druidism or a similar religious outlook.¹¹

The country maiden and her mother dwell in this cottage, apparently alone except for their cat, dog and white rabbit. They are astonishingly similar to the female variety of the Flower People, who evolved from the Hippies of the nineteen sixties and are still locally common on the margins of accessible small forests in Britain and America. There is space around their cottage only for a flower and vegetable garden, yet the mother serves Anodos “some bread and some milk [...], [19] with a kindly apology for the *homeliness* of the fare” (18, my italics). Many of her present-day equivalents likewise expect daily milk and bread deliveries to their isolated dwellings.

The cottage is “furnished with rough chairs and tables, from which even the bark ha[s] not been removed” (17). This does not seem to be a sign of a genuinely primitive outlook, but rather of a attraction for “the simple life” associated with an inherent distrust of craftsmanship—in fact

of anything connected with men. When Anodos questions the mother he becomes more and more surprised at how articulate she is, even though he knows that the fairies of which she speaks are “well known to the world, having been so often described” (32). Spencer’s account of *Errour* reminds us that many people fail to perceive the errors and fantasies in the books and papers they read. Unreliable reading matter is probably the principal source of the mother and daughter’s confused understanding of the nature of “fairies.” A “great old volume” of “wondrous tales of Fairy Land, and olden times, and the knights of King Arthur’s table” (21) that they possess seems likely to have been a major source of error for them, through their reading it using their fancy rather than their imagination.

In a similar way, the mother seems to have learned a smattering of the ancient tradition of white rabbits as spiritual guides and consequently tries to imagine her own pet white rabbit as a spiritually inspired being. (It may be because Anodos notices that the information she gains from this rabbit is minimal that when he encounters his own genuine white-rabbit spiritual guide in chapter 5 he invests it with scarcely any importance.)

Anodos, although nervous, eagerly anticipates encountering supernatural beings. But he fails to notice the crucial differences between the two women’s imaginations and their mere fancies. So when he finds he can perceive what the mother calls “the young children of the flower fairies” and she tells him “[t]hey are of the same race” as what Anodos calls the “tree fairies” (23), it is unsurprising that he should believe in both. But the two are opposite in nature, as the attentive reader soon discovers.

Anodos ought to have known better by then, because he had already seen what the two women regarded as a manifestation of the evil of an Ash tree. The mother had looked out of the window to see if the Ash was quiescent, and when Anodos joined her she pushed him away and quickly blocked the window with the “large old book” (21). Whether this was merely the nearest thing to hand, or whether she believed it possessed some protective power, is not clear. When, subsequently, Anodos wished to read the book, the woman, before giving it to him, drew a translucent white blind across the window to prevent the Ash looking in. Then, while Anodos is reading, he tells how

a low hurried cry from my hostess caused me to look up from the book, and I read no more.

“Look there!” she said. “Look at his fingers!”

[...] the setting sun was shining through a cleft in the clouds

piled up in the west; and a shadow as of a large distorted hand, with thick knobs and humps on the [20] fingers, so that it was much wider across the fingers than across the undivided part of the hand, passed slowly over the little blind, and then as slowly returned in the opposite direction. (22)

This projected shadow of a branch blown by an evening breeze appears to be the foundation upon which the woman and daughter have constructed their fantasy, and they augment it from time to time by imagining in the foliage an awful face, and by believing that wind-blown branches are purposefully stretching towards them and trying to kill them with fright. All too obviously, the mother is projecting her hatred and fear of men upon the Ash¹² (although vulnerable innocents like Anodos apparently do not evoke any hostility from her.)

Anodos' powers of fancy have been heightened by the tale he was reading in the old book. This related Sir Percivale's encounter with a demon lady, where, in traditional grail-quester fashion, "he rove himself through the thigh" (22). Such a tale, particularly when read in these disturbing circumstances, would be likely to heighten any young man's sexual insecurities. It seems to cause Anodos to regard the Ash as a threat to himself, and when he eventually leaves the cottage he fantasises its in-dwelling ogre-fairy pursuing him. His terror seems temporarily to exorcise his over-active libido (as it has been described by more than one critic) and he finds himself able to regard the beautiful dryad of a Beech who rescues him without wishing to possess her.

With Anodos and this Beech, MacDonald is allegorising an attitude towards the world of nature directly contrary to the attitude of exploitation that has prevailed for centuries in the West. This attitude of love and respect had been revived in the nineteenth century by some of the Romantics, most notably Wordsworth, but others adopted the sensuous mood that Anodos exhibits immediately prior to encountering the Alder (Docherty, *Literary* 24; 33; 37-38). 'Nature' here seems to include human nature, because the Beech confirms that Anodos' view of the Ash is an insight into himself. He "has a hole in his heart that nobody knows of but one or two, and he is always trying to fill it up, but he cannot" (46). At Anodos' current stage of spiritual development, his voracious possessiveness can never be "filled up" (satisfied), and he is in great danger of being devoured by that appetite.

What Anodos appears to need is a feminine ideal, and such a figure is born to him in chapter 5. But all his sexual voraciousness then promptly

re-emerges, and this “white lady” flees with Anodos in hot pursuit (61-63). Fortunately, the story of Sir Percivale that Anodos partially read in the cottage recurs to him at this point as a vivid imagination. A knight like Sir Percivale, who clearly represents Anodos’ conscience, warns him of the folly of his pursuit and repeats and elaborates the warning of the country maiden about the Alder-tree (66). But when Anodos soon afterwards encounters that dangerous dryad he cannot believe she is not his white lady. His feelings in the summer twilight could scarcely be more sensuous, “oppressing the heart as with a condensed atmosphere of dreamy undefined love and longing” (37). And this “Maiden of the Alder” can apparently seduce anyone who adopts a possessively sensuous attitude to the world of nature. That she [21] remains a “Maiden” despite all her seductions of sensuous young men confirms that she is indeed Nature herself, *as seen from this sensuous viewpoint*, and is thus the antithesis of the Beech.

The next morning, Anodos goes even further than many young men after a one-night affair in the way he projects his self loathing upon his partner. He does not merely make the traditional crude association with a fissured tree: he sees her as literally a merging of fissured tree and woman. At this point he is in extreme danger of being devoured by his voracious Ash-nature. But the blows of an axe resound through the forest and he interprets this as the knight saving him by attacking the tree in which—according to the mother and daughter in the forest cottage—the monster resides. After this near escape it is no wonder that Anodos elevates the knight into what is, effectively, both his masculine ideal and his conscience.

4. Anodos’ Imaginations about Flowers

MacDonald clearly implies that the projections of the mother and daughter upon the Ash, and Anodos’ rather different projection, are both archetypal psychological aberrations. The same is true of Anodos’ projection on the Alder.

By contrast, the two women’s imaginations, shared by Anodos, of what the mother calls “the young children of the flower fairies,” are related to an important aspect of what Spenser saw as Phantastes’ function of “insight.” Anodos describes it well, except that his use of the term “fairy,” although conventional enough, is unhelpful:

Just as you could form some idea of the nature of a man from the kind of house he built, if he followed his own taste, so you could, without seeing the fairies, tell what any one of them is like, by looking at the flower till you feel that you understand it. For just what the flower says to you, would the face and

form of the fairy say; only so much more plainly as a face and Human figure can say more than a flower. [...] you would see a strange resemblance, almost oneness, between the flower and the fairy, which you could not describe, but which described itself to you. (25)

In “The Imagination,” MacDonald ironically contrasts run-of-the-mill scientific imagination with genuine poetic imagination such as Anodos describes in the above passage:

From a little bone, worn with ages of death, older than the man can think, [the palaeontologist], his scientific-imagination dashed with the poetic, calls up the form, size, habits, periods, belonging to an animal never beheld by human eyes, even to the mingling contrasts of scales and wings, of feathers and hair. Through the combined lenses of science and the imagination, we look back into ancient times [...] The imagination of the poet, on the other hand, dashed with the imagination of the man of science, revealed to Goethe the prophecy of the flower in the leaf. (15)

MacDonald is a lesser poet and scientist than Goethe, and, despite his considerable poetic and scientific understanding, he exaggerates here. Nevertheless, his argument remains valid. [22]

In the vast majority of flowering plants, the blossoms are far more elaborated than the rest of the plant, even though “the prophecy of the flower” *is* present in the leaf. “[W]hat the flower says to you” if you mediate upon it, is most easily related to human gestures and facial expressions, since, as Anodos says, these are our most differentiated tools for expressing subtle nuances of meaning where no appropriate words have been evolved or retained in the language. But that a flower can be described in this way is testimony to the validity of Coleridgean Imagination.

However, when the essentially fixed nature of a flower is extrapolated into the *behaviour* of its specific “flower fairy” then imagination passes into fancy. Anodos implicitly contrasts the Rose, deflowered by any passing zephyr (27), with the chaste Primrose that retains its petals until after the whole plant has faded (30). This contrast could be argued to be valid when such a characteristic is employed as a metaphor for a trait appearing in some humans. But when Anodos, by implication, attributes additional characteristics of impetuosity to the Rose and of chastity to the Primrose, any originally valid metaphor has been left behind. Secondarily derived metaphors of this type, although frequently employed by poetic young men

in love, are essentially false.

When Anodos has left the cottage garden, he remarks that
as I went further into the wood these sights and sounds became
fewer, giving way to others of a different character. A little
forest of wild hyacinths was alive with exquisite creatures, who
stood nearly motionless, with drooping necks, holding each by
the stem of her flower and swaying gently with it [...] In like
manner, though differing of course in form and meaning, stood a
group of harebells, like little angels waiting, till they were wanted
to go on some yet unknown message. (35)

A stand of one species of a beautiful wild flower generates a totally different emotion from the cultivated flowers in a garden, even with traditional “cottage-garden planting. This is probably why Anodos describes the situation here as “of a different character,”

The whole of *Phantastes*, as *A Faerie Romance for Men and Women*, is pervaded by a mood of Faerie.¹³ But although the book in part draws on Spenser, Blake, Novalis and others, this mood is nevertheless very personal to MacDonald. However, the “fairies” (*qua* fairies) in *Phantastes* seem to derive from the sophisticated fancy of miniature flower/insect-fairies that became fashionable in eighteenth-century England. MacDonald probably derives them via Blake, who was commissioned to provide illustrations for Erasmus Darwin’s *The Botanic Garden*. Blake became interested in Darwin’s ideas about the sex life of flowers, and then often employed flower-fairy imagery as a metaphor for human sexuality—as in several of his *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. But the fairy funeral of the Primrose that Anodos sees (28-30) seems to owe something to Blake’s account to a lady of a fairy funeral he saw when at Felpham, just as the Thistle fairies that taunt Anodos after he leaves the garden (34) seem to borrow upon Blake’s account—in a poem in a letter to Thomas Butts of November the twenty-second, 1802—of an encounter with a thistle fairy at Felpham.¹⁴ [23]

5. Anodos’ Imaginations of Elementals and of Insect ‘Astrality.’

On first leaving the garden, Anodos encounters escaped garden flowers as well as wild flowers. He describes how, from every blossom of bell- or trumpet-form, “curious little figures shot up their heads, peeped at me, and drew back. [...] I was sure some of them were intruders, and belonged to the gnomes or goblin fairies who inhabit the ground and earthly creeping plants” (34). Gnomes are wholly unrelated to the imaginations described

above as “fairies.” They are imaginations primarily related to the ground, as Anodos says, being one of the four classes of Elemental Beings traditionally associated with the four elements. This very old tradition was systematised by Paracelsus (1493-1541).¹⁵ The other three classes are Sylphs, Undines and Salamanders/Fire-Spirits. The beings that were not “intruders” in the above quotation were presumably Sylphs, water-air elementals particularly associated with the green parts of plants. Some Gnomes are traditionally associated with human beings, and Anodos describes encounters with these later in his story (110-11; 206-09).

In mid-paragraph Anodos switches to describing his imaginative perceptions of insects. As dusk has now fallen, he first notices the glow-worms. “They were just like the glowworms of our own land, for they are fairies everywhere; worms in the day and glowworms by night, when their own [true nature?] can appear, and they can be themselves to others as well as themselves” (35). Then, in an imagination so beautifully constructed that it must be termed a myth, Anodos describes “great strong-armed beetles” searching in couples for the glow-worms and using them to ignite dry lumps of dung. Each lump then shoots

up into the air like a sky-rocket, seldom, however, reaching the height of the highest tree. Just like a rocket too, [each] burst into the air, and fell in a shower of the most gorgeously coloured sparks of every variety of hue. [The beetles] never used the same glowworm twice [...] but let him go, apparently uninjured by the use they had made of him. (36)

There is an obvious allusion here to the Egyptian dung-beetle god Kephri, who nightly pushes the sun underground from west to east then propels it into the morning sky like a great golden rocket. Equally obviously there is sexual metaphor in every detail, not least in the way a pair of beetles work in different ways, the one igniting, with the glowing tail of the glow-worm, the dung lump guarded by the other, where the young will be born and develop. The exploding rocket imagery is a not-unusual metaphor for orgasm, but it is used by MacDonald with exquisite tact, its beauty stressed by the implied comparison with “the interwoven dances in the air of splendidly coloured fire-flies, which sped hither and thither, turned, twisted, crossed and recrossed, entwining every complexity of intervolved motion” (36-37).¹⁶

In *Lilith* (1895), MacDonald modifies this imagery. A Raven (without help from a companion or a glow-worm) repeatedly digs up unidentified worms and flings them into the air as gorgeous butterflies or fireflies (17-

18; 46; 162). The Raven [24] first does this with worms in human dung (Docherty, *Literary* 393-95), and the rejuvenation of what had seemed spent and rejected is self-evident. However, the many details and the allusions here appear to be intended to be meditated together in a comparable way to that which Anodos recommends for studying a flower (see above), not dissected out one by one. In fact, with passages of this nature in both of MacDonald's faerie fantasies, a semi-overt meaning—the rejuvenation of spent matter in the present example—seems always to have the purpose of encouraging the reader to search for additional more covert and usually more important meanings.

It is only Anodos, not MacDonald, who is, understandably, confused about the different classes of immaterial beings examined above.¹⁷ Subsequently when plants and animals are mentioned in *Phantastes* it is for much more conventional reasons: either to heighten the atmosphere in particular episodes, as for example when Anodos makes his way down a river to the fairy palace (112-15); or in the creation of an elaborate metaphor, as with the butterflies and moths whose wings are collected by a beggar girl (300-04).

6. Other Major Esoteric Features in *Phantastes*.

Cultivation of Coleridgean/Goethean Imagination leads a spiritual quester to imaginative constructions that are no more arbitrary in form than is an individual plant. To place the above-recognised imaginative distinctions in context as by no means the only esoteric images in *Phantastes*, it is necessary to examine briefly a few of Anodos' other adventures in "Fairy Land."

Anodos' simple and humble projection of his conscience as the Parsivale-like knight who becomes his male ideal, is in striking contrast with his creation of his female ideal, the white/marble lady. This latter creation follows complex esoteric traditions. Every one of (he details associated with the "very steep" "bare rocky hill" (53) with a cave at its base where she is born resemble the details of engravings of the *Mons Philosophorum*—a traditional image of the human mind as the Mount of Philosophy.

MacDonald's account is specifically of these details as perfected in seven Rosicrucian imagery (Docherty, *Easter* 4; 8-10). By contrast, every one of the details associated with the birth itself coincides with classical Greek illustrations of the *anodos* of a goddess (Soto, *Ghthonic*. 28-31; 46=47).¹⁸

The fairy palace—Anodos' palace of his feeling soul—possesses an obvious affinity with the "stately pleasure dome" and its "caverns

measureless to man” of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”(87-89). But the most striking esoteric aspects of the palace are its external galleries and the central hall with the twelve satellite halls. The external galleries resemble the “etheric currents” surrounding the human body as described by clairvoyants, and that this is their likely nature is reinforced when the central hall of the palace is considered. All major traditions describe the central chakra of the human body—the heart chakra—as twelve-‘petalled,’ with the movement of the ‘petals’ partially inherent and in part requiring to be developed by the individual. All is ‘marble’ in MacDonald’s account, with the movement of [25] the ‘petals’ depicted as the dancing of marble statues that come intermittently to life. But otherwise all his details correspond with traditional accounts, as with his depiction of the *Mons Philosophorum* and of the *anodos* of the marble lady.

“These ‘set-piece’ esoteric features, along with others, when recognised as deriving from Coleridgian Imagination, can be said to enhance the Broad Church Anglicanism expounded by F.D. Maurice and those, including MacDonald, who shared his outlook. Their recognition should lead theological exegesis of MacDonald’s books beyond exploration of conventional regions of Victorian theology by pointing to the traditional studies (the “Perennial Philosophy”) that attracted MacDonald in his attempts to link his own creative imagination with that of those who had preceded him.

Stephen Prickett writes that:

Behind the magical beings of MacDonald’s universes lie the philosophical and theological principles of a scheme that is as carefully worked out as that of Dante— indeed, his references to Dante [...] make it clear that, almost unbelievably, he is inviting just such a comparison. [He] is seeking to establish himself within an existing literary tradition—a tradition not of folklore and primitive ritual, but of complex theological sophistication. (18-19)

MacDonald’s “complex theological speculation” extends deeply into Neo-Platonic esoteric realms.

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Notes

1. When Anodos returns to his castle at the end of his story his sister’s [sic] tell him he has “been gone [...] twenty-one days” (321). But where he could have been in the everyday world when exploring his Fairy Palace is not explained, unless, as seems likely, “been gone” is intended wholly idiomatically as a euphemism to explain a mental state they could not comprehend.
2. In an epigraph to his title, MacDonald quotes Phinneas Fletcher’s *The Purple Island* (1633), a work that enormously expands Spencer’s account of the House of Alma (as—in some respects—does *Phantastes*). However, there are many important covert allusions to Spenser throughout *Phantastes* but apparently none to Fletcher.
3. It was possibly no accident, but deliberate self-irony, that caused MacDonald to republish *Phantastes* in a ten-volume edition of his stories that he titled *Works of Fancy and Imagination* (1871). Moreover, the format and binding chosen for this edition may well reflect his friend Lewis Carroll’s poem “Poeta Fit, Non Nascitur” where a grandfather gives sardonic advice upon cultivating the fancy in one’s writing to catch the mood of the day- “‘The True, the Good, the Beautiful— / Those are the things that pay:’” He concludes: “Now try your hand ere Fancy / Have lost its present glow—” / ‘And then,’ his grandson added, / ‘We’ll publish it you know: / Green cloth—gold lettered at the back—/In duodecimo!’”
4. This woman resembles Charles Williams’ Lilith figure in *Descent Into Hell*, 1937.

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1993) and not MacDonald's *Lilith* in *Lilith* .

5. This seems to be an imaginative picture both of something that Anodos (and MacDonald) achieved in the "everyday world" and of an achievement by Anodos within his own soul.

6. The above Section 1 is a brief summary of the *Phantastes* chapter of Docherty (1997), modified to incorporate subsequent research.

7. Richard Reis compares the "Ignorant/Stupid" narrator of MacDonald's *Lilith* to the narrator figures who accompany a famous detective in many detective stories, such as Dr Watson in the Sherlock Holmes stories. Reis points out that "MacDonald is using the ignorant-narrator point of view as a challenge to his reader, challenging us to get the point which Vane misses" (27). Exactly the same is true of the narrator Anodos in *Phantastes*.

8. The study of *Phantastes* that best takes account of the importance of its varying imaginative moods is in the second edition of Rolland Hein's *The Harmony Within*, (Chicago: Cornerstone, 1999) 77-113. There is also keen perception of MacDonald's creation and use of imaginative moods in chapter 12 (on his poetry) and chapter 24 (on his

theology) in William Raeper's *George MacDonald*. (Tring: Lion, 1987). [27]

9. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, C.S. Lewis, either drawing upon *Phantastes* or upon old tradition, depicts the true pilgrims' path as eastward. South he depicts as too sensual, and north as too cold and heartless.

10. It is probably an Alder tree of this type that hinders Tangle in the forest in "The Golden Key," published nine years after *Phantastes*.

11. Hein suggests that the four oaks indicate "the trustworthiness of the country maiden's mother" (84). But the virtues of the oak are masculine—it is the tree of Mars—and this woman rejects aggressive masculinity.

12. The following poem was written in similar circumstances by a lady known to the present writer after she had visited several female friends living in association with a community of Flower People in a large wood in—of all places—South Essex. It is not written as fantasy fiction but is intended as a serious epilogue to a seriously intended book of paintings of dryads and elementals encountered in Maine.

The House in the Wood

There is a shadow on the grass,
But no one passes;
There is a voice that calls,
Yet no one speaks.
But in the darkness, faces
Peer through the window panes;
Strange shadowy forms that glide
Among the trees and laugh
And lean against the house—
sliding long fingers through the letter box,
Tapping upon the shuttered doors:
The trees move nearer, darkness
Holds its breath; these forms

That have no shape nor shadow
Are so old only the moon
And the darkness know them,
And fear—even older than the moon.

13. J.R.R. Tolkien touches only briefly, although very helpfully, on the origin of the English concept of fairies in his essay “On Fairy-Stories” (13-14). The whole essay, however, is very valuable in the way it conveys the traditional understanding of the nature of Faerie.

14. According to his son Greville, MacDonald had always “had in his library [...] a facsimile of the original *Jerusalem* and an early hand-coloured copy of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*” (555). This is astonishing enough for that date, but currently unpublished research suggests that his knowledge of Blake, in part through his Swedenborgian doctor friend Garth Wilkinson, was much wider.

15. “A Book on Nymphs...” *Four Treatises of Theophrastus von Hohenheim*. Trs. Henry Sigerist, C. Lilian Temkin, George Rosen and Gregory Zilboorg. (Baltimore, 1941). Robert Lee Wolff suggests that Paracelsus “had only been adapting the beliefs of the Neo-Platonists of the second and third centuries, transmitted to the Renaissance by Michael Psellus, their eleventh century Byzantine disciple” (48). But while Paracelsus doubtless drew upon such sources he was essentially re-enlivening a still-widespread way of thinking about the world.

16. Anodos apparently means that many different colours of light were emitted by different fire-flies, although only one colour by any one species of fire-fly.

17. None of these are “spiritual beings.” “Nature Worship,” like so-called “Spiritualism,” has nothing whatsoever to do with spirituality. See Rene Guenon: “The Confusion of the Psychic and the Spiritual.” *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*. Trs. Lord Northbourne. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1972) 283-90.

18. Soto also convincingly links other elements of Greek anodos myths with other episodes of *Phantastes*, including episodes examined above. It is normal for MacDonald to interweave two, and usually more, themes in this way. Even in several of what were once called his “realistic novels” he weaves extensive esoteric themes into the plots, but only that of Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury has so far been investigated:—by Docherty in “The Limitations of Reductionist Approaches to *Thomas Wingfold, Curate, North Wind*,

19 (2000): 64-66. [28]